

Sub-project A02

Organization of Knowledge through Paratexts: The Donglin Manuscripts

Prof. Dr. Kai Vogelsang

Dr. LIN Hang

The Donglin Manuscripts

"Donglin people" is how a group of scholars rallying around Gu Xiancheng (1550-1612) called themselves, united in the late period of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) by their political and ethical resistance to the central government which was then controlled by the notorious eunuch Wei Zhongxian. As of 1604, Donglin Academy situated in Wuxi (Jiangsu) represented the centre of this group where two large and several smaller conferences were held each year which encouraged philosophical and political debate but also prompted the exchange of manuscripts.

Several manuscripts are still reflecting the discourse of the Donglin people today: classic commentaries, chronicles, lecture and travel notes, poetry, miscellaneous collections, and various other scripts. Most of these manuscripts were not produced by the individual author independently, but were submitted "to several good friends of the author, asking them to have a critical look at the merits and shortcomings of the manuscripts before circulating them without limitation" (Liang Qichao). This was common practice in the scholarly circles of late imperial China.

This discursive context resulted in a large number of paratexts that may be found in the Donglin Manuscripts: marginal notes, forewords and epilogues, glosses, deletions, transpositions, corrections, colophons, editor's instructions, etc. These paratexts bear testimony to the way in which "friends" had "a critical look at the merits and shortcomings" of manuscripts and thus contributed to the final form of a text.

The Project

The project aims at reconstructing the interrelation of use and tradition in connection with the Donglin Manuscripts, focusing on the function of paratexts. The organization of knowledge will be analyzed by studying 15 manuscripts of outstanding personalities who are mainly located in the libraries of Wuxi, Shanghai and Nanjing. How do paratexts contribute to organizing, governing and commenting on the knowledge contained in the Donglin Manuscripts? Who participated in the discussions of the Donglin people, and in which way and order? What were the rules of this procedure and which ways of expression did it bring about?



Donglin Academy situated in Wuxi, founded in 1111, became a gathering place from 1604 for the group rallying around Gu Xiancheng. After having been severely damaged the building was renovated in 1982 to attract tourists.



Gao Panlong, Poems and Prose. Autograph, Shanghai Library.

How were arguments brought forward, in which form and with which plausibilities? Apart from a philological study of the manuscripts, technological support will be used as well which by analyzing the material (paper, ink) and scripts may provide further insight into the organization of knowledge in the context of the scholarly tradition of the Donglin people. The project not only intends to clarify which paratexts were produced in which form and with which function, but also strives to find out by whom the paratexts were produced and in which order.

Objectives

The project aims not only at getting a precise, lively and detailed picture of how the Donglin group dealt with manuscripts, but also at providing insight into the role of manuscripts as a cultural technique and into the function of paratexts regarding the organization of knowledge. The cultural practices reflected by the Donglin Manuscripts will be placed within the wider context of manuscript cultures in Asia, Africa and Europe. Which ways of dealing with manuscripts are characteristic of the Donglin people, which ways are typical of Chinese manuscript culture in a broader sense or of the scholarly traditions of other cultures - and, finally, in what way does the organization of knowledge in manuscripts differ from the print culture which established itself simultaneously? While analyzing a small but richly documented field of Chinese manuscript culture in late imperial China, the project intends to contribute to the fundamental question about the characteristic features of manuscript cultures in Asia, Africa and Europe.



An Xifan, Travel Notes. Autograph, Shanghai Library.